April 2006 Volume 19 Number 04 FREE

HUB

DIGITAL LIVING

3 tax software packages reviewed

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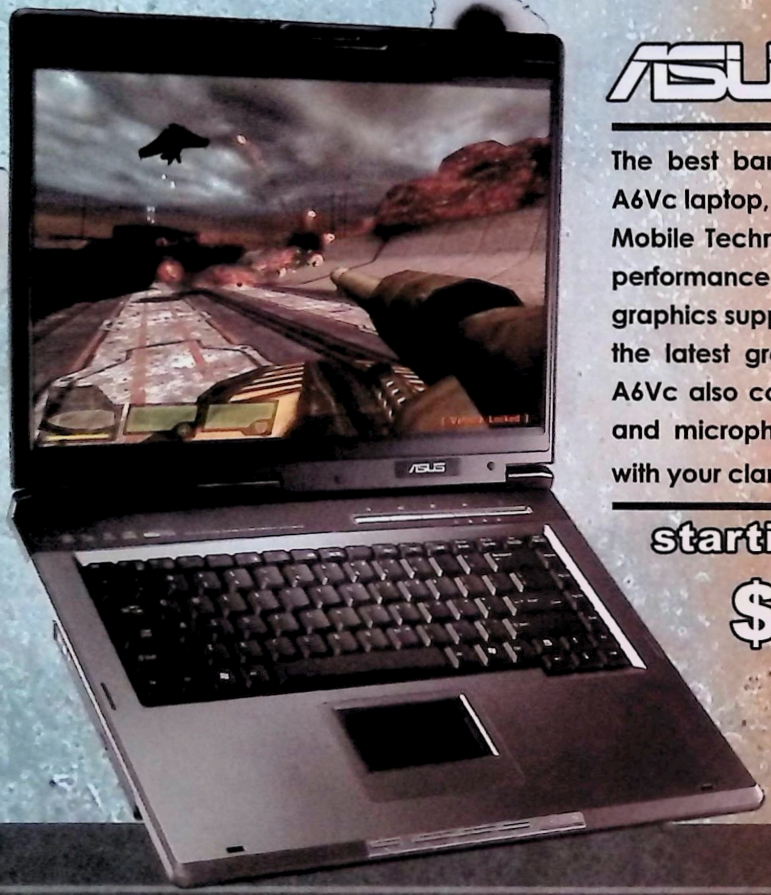

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Editorial

Sitting in a cubicle farm breathing recycled office air, it's easy to idealize the independent, self-employed worker, keeping her own hours and working to line his own pockets.

Keeping a small or home office running and running efficiently is no mean feat.

Aside from the supplying the actual product or service the business offers, there are accounting concerns, new business to drum up, meetings to attend, Web sites to maintain, correspondence to keep on top of, invoicing, accounting and an entire world of other issues and responsibilities that crop up.

Combine that with the siren song of time-wasting Web sites or daytime soap operas or the shrill cries or stomping of children's feet while you're trying to be productive and it's a wonder anything gets done at all.

But get done it does. After all, the indy business is as much about so called "sweat equity" as it is start-up equity.

In recent years, Statistics Canada has recorded a changing employment landscape where more and more people are considered self-employed. In our own annual readership survey, almost 10 per cent of readers identified themselves as self-employed.

It's a long standing dream for many gainfully employed people to strike out on their own

The lure of no rigid nine-to-five work days, no megalomaniacal bosses to answer to, no pointless 4:30 meetings that somehow stretch well past the end of day. No waiting until "casual Friday" to wear whatever clothes are comfortable. No more long commutes into the downtown core.

The reality however is that while independent workers enjoy a freedom that comes from being their own boss, they also have to be their own lackey. Nine-to-five can stretch out to encompass the entire day.

Technology is a boon for the independent business; from multi-function printers that can print, copy, scan and fax to software suites designed to keep the books in order and to make things a little easier when the tax man cometh.

The independent business is about working smarter, not necessarily harder. Choosing the right mix of technology can help make this a reality.

Enjoy the issue,
Andrew Moore-Crispin
Editor-in-Chief

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HUB

DIGITAL LIVING

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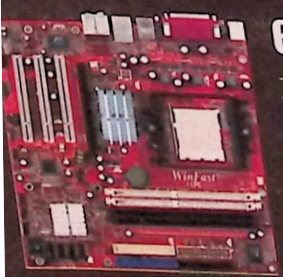

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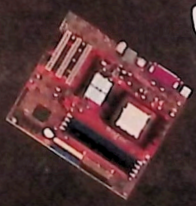

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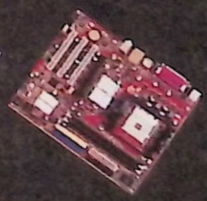

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Time to pay the Harper

If your blood pressure is on the rise as you watch the calendar race towards the deadline for your annual tax reckoning, take comfort in the knowledge that you're not alone. Also take comfort in the fact that there are plenty of software solutions designed to make the process of calculating and submitting your taxes as painless as possible.

Complex taxes are still best handled by accountants, but those Canadians who don't own multiple businesses, deal in off-shore accounts, or control millions of dollars worth of investments have the potential to be well served by the ever-expanding selection of tax software packages on the market. Here's how a few popular packages stack up against each other.

QuickTax Standard
www.quicktax.ca

This is the big gun. Developed by financial software powerhouse Intuit, QuickTax was one of the first personal tax software packages available in Canada and is currently the top selling application of its kind. Users have access to seven-day email, phone, and Internet support, and a guarantee that Intuit will cover the penalty of any errors caused by its software that end up costing users money.

If you've used previous iterations of QuickTax you'll have no problem figuring out this year's version. A straightforward interview process leads users through their taxes. Your responses to early questions let QuickTax customize the interview to focus on areas in which you might have the potential to save money.

Priced at $39.95, QuickTax facilitates an unlimited number of returns for individuals who make less than $25,000, and a maximum of five returns for gross incomes greater than $25,000. As was the case with all of the applications evaluated, most returns can be filed electronically using NetFile.

UFile
www.ufile.ca

UFile places a strong second after QuickTax, providing a solution similar to its primary competitor but at a cheaper price – the retail version processes ten returns with gross incomes greater than $25,000 for only $19.99.

As with QuickTax, UFile leads users through a simple interview that makes information entry fast and easy, ensuring that users spend little or no time fussing over T1 line items that shouldn't concern them.

UFile employs a sophisticated tax logic called MaxBack that purportedly analyzes every possible means of lowering individual taxes, similar to QuickTax's double checking system. Relatively simple returns based on the same financial information generated identical bottom lines in both applications.

While several tax software packages offer either a slapdash solution or no solution at all for Quebecers, UFile goes out of its way to cater to residents of Canada's predominantly francophone province. As information is entered during the interview process, UFile automatically fills out both federal and Quebec provincial forms simultaneously. It also permits users to file electronically with both Revenue Quebec and Revenue Canada.

GenuTax
www.genutax.ca

A relative newcomer to the tax software market, GenuTax is a direct response to two common criticisms leveled at other tax preparation applications.

The first criticism is that many consumers feel as though they are forced into buying software that hardly changes from year to year, save a few amendments made to accommodate evolving tax regulations. By contrast GenuTax is a multi-year application, which means users need only buy the software once, then download an annual update for free in following years.

The second criticism is that most tax software limits the number of returns users can generate. GenuTax permits an unlimited number of returns to be created, regardless of income size, with restrictions imposed only against persons or organizations calculating taxes for a fee.

It sounds almost too good to be true, but there are a couple of wrinkles that GenuTax has yet to iron out. For starters, it isn't available to Quebecers. Secondly, the $34.99 application's interview process isn't as refined or accessible as that of its competitors.

By Chad Sapieha

What if I use a Mac?

TaxTron (www.taxtron.ca) was the only installed application we looked at that supports a Macintosh OS. It further distinguishes itself by raising the income limitation for free filing to $30,000 as opposed to its competitors' $25,000 ceiling. A license to file a single return with a gross income over $30,000 is just $12.99, while a ten return license costs $24.99.

Another solution for Mac users could be a Web-based tax application. Most online tax services can be accessed from both PCs and Macs, and have the potential to be significantly less expensive than their locally hosted counterparts. Here are a few Web-based options:

QuickTax Web (www.quicktaxweb.com) Provides the depth of QuickTax Standard but with pay-per-return pricing starting at $19.95.

UFile.ca (www.ufile.ca) Just as full-featured as its PC-based cousin, but allows an individual return to be processed for $14.95.

SnapTax (www.snaptax.ca) Made by the people behind QuickTax, it's an uncomplicated way to process simpler taxes and costs just $9.95 per return.

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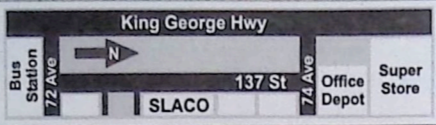

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DV, or Not DV

Video, for pleasure and for business

TV is usually described as an entertainment medium; watching video is normally a leisure activity. Leaving aside matters of content quality and delivery platform for just one moment, we know that most viewing is for pleasure, not for business.

But not always. Sole proprietors, SOHO (small office, home office) workers and enterprise employees alike can use digital media techniques and technologies to boost their business and achieve greater success. Digital video, and the many new ways it's acquired, packaged and distributed, can be particularly helpful.

Video presents many advantages as a marketing and communications tool. Defining your company's unique selling points to the marketplace is crucial to its growth and success, and video can be used to deliver that message over and over again, with regularity and dependability. Video has great emotional impact, and so can be used to build a meaningful relationship with the customer. It can also be used to present detailed information and step-by-step instruction, and so is a tremendous tool for product demonstration and service support.

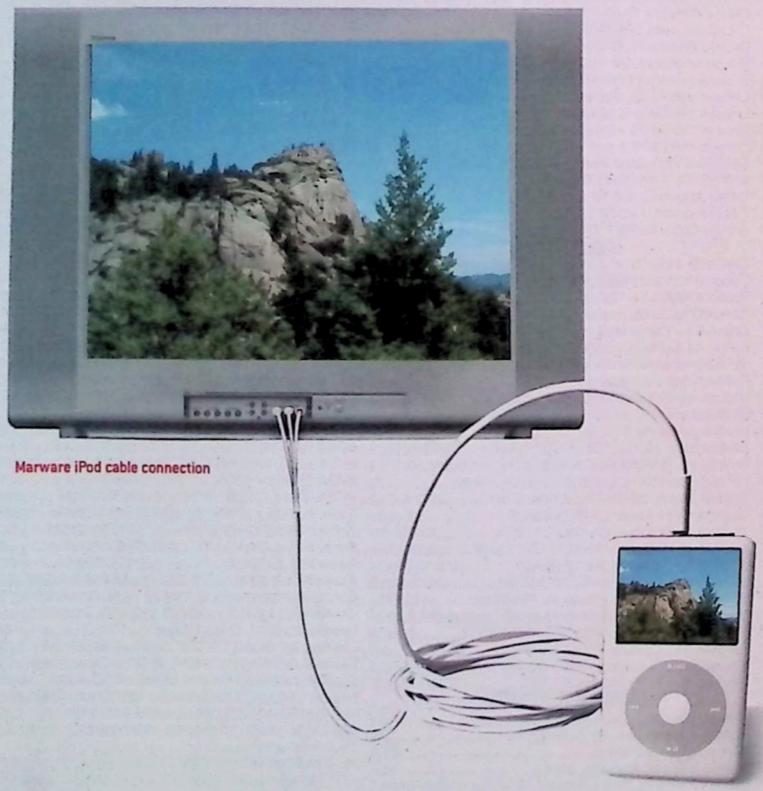
Whether a small home-based operation, a store-front business or a major multi-national, video can help different businesses in different ways. I've met with people working in all kinds of companies that use video in some shape, manner or form: real estate, travel and tourism, construction, restaurants, banquet halls and conference facilities, recreational activities and summer camps, retail sales and the arts – photographers and videographers, naturally, but painters, sculptors and performing artists, too. (I'm sure there are more unique ideas out there, and I'd love to hear about how you use video in your business; write to me using the email address at the end of this article.)

But no matter what the business, the goals are the same: Increased sales. Enhanced marketing and promotion. Reduced travel time. Better customer communications and end-user support. Always-on product availability. More effective training and development. Engaging new product launches and announcements.

Whatever your business, and whatever the objectives you have for it, another key benefit of video is its portability. Even when videocassettes (remember VHS, much less 3/4-inch?) were the norm, it was relatively easy to carry video programming around – although carrying a TV was not!

Now, portable media devices, like the iPod and many other products that combine a liquid crystal display (LCD) and a miniature storage device (be it hard drive, memory card or optical disk), make carrying a screen just as easy as carrying the content.

I've been playing with an iPod remote docking station from Marware, for example, that's used to connect an iPod to a TV or home theatre system. The iPod is nice, but photos, videos and music can be presented to greater effect on larger screens and bigger stereos using Marware's simple cable connections. (Even S-video, for higher quality viewing, is supported). Such docking devices are small, lightweight and easy to carry around. In the case of the Marware unit, its USB connection means content can be downloaded from a computer to the iPod, and that the iPod can be charged, quickly and easily.



Marware iPod cable connection

The Wolverine MVP 9000, another portable media player now on the market, combines the audio/video/photo playback portability of the iPod with memory card compatibility, a voice recorder, and USB connectivity to a 60GB or 90GB internal hard drive. The Wolverine, too, can be connected to TV or stereo systems, but it also comes in a unique traveling case with its own built-in speaker, handy for desktop or boardroom table presentations to small groups of people.

Perhaps portable media players are not seen as a critical component of business operation, but how about the phone? There are not many companies without telephone capability, and that also means there's not many companies without video capability.

Cell phones, as we all know, have been imbued with any number of additional

capabilities and functions beyond simply sharing the spoken word. Photo-taking and video-making, in particular, turn the phone into a Swiss Army Knife of the media world.

Now, a new Xcute GSM phone from Texas Instruments may even surpass the capabilities of many cameras, much less phones. It's described as the first 8-megapixel GSM phone in the world, and it features built-in audio and video codecs to allow playback and recording of MP3, WMA, MPEG-4 and DivX video files. Video can be recorded in real-time (up to 30 frames per second) at resolutions up to 640 x 480. Digital imagery from the phone can be viewed on computers, TVs, or other compatible handheld devices.

So, phones are morphing into cameras, but they are also becoming scanners, in the sense that new functions anticipated to appear in wireless cell phones include the ability to capture metadata from objects all around us.

That data can be visible, like a barcode or the "QR" codes popular in Japan, or it could be invisible, such as "steganographic" information, which involves hiding or encoding digital information in a photographic image. It is invisible to the human eye but extractable by complex algorithms embedded in the camera phone.

One company, scanR, lets the camera phone be used as a scanner, copier and fax machine. Nextcode offers free downloadable software that reads

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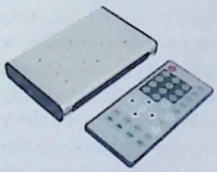

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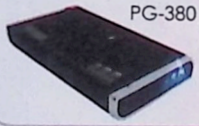

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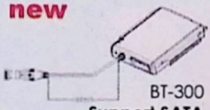

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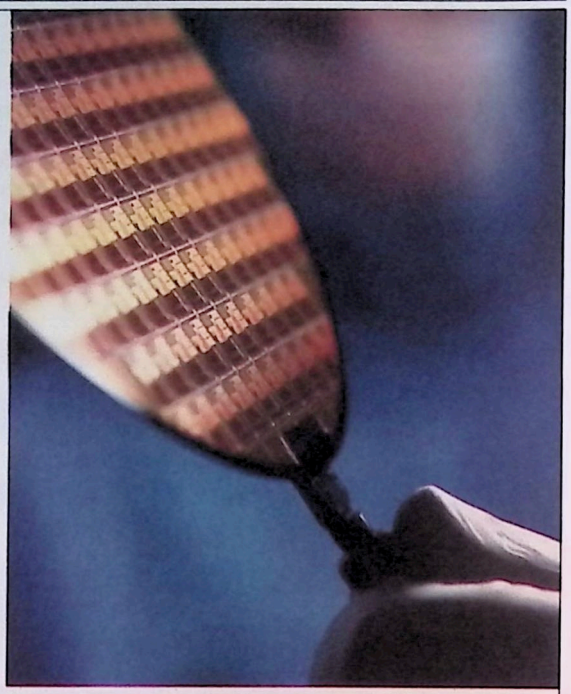
certain kinds of barcodes and allows the user to download product information, ringtones and wallpapers. Another company, Mobot, has a tool to scan and recognize photographed advertisements, products and logos, then uses visual recognition technology to provide additional product or related service information. So digital imagery and video content is becoming more and more tightly integrated into business operations and infrastructure.

Previously we've spoken about many tools, techniques and technologies used to create and deliver engaging digital video content in this column. New products with new features are always coming onto the market, and a couple of new software packages are worth noting in that they directly support the notion of creating and delivering video anywhere, anytime, in almost any shape, size or flavour required.

For Windows users, Wildform has released new software with the ability to capture audio and video from a camera, microphone or VTR; conversion tools for video, PowerPoint and Flash formatted files; timeline-based editing tools for assembling video, together with text, graphics, animation and sound; and a suite of drawing, flowcharting and text tools.

Its output choices include motion media for the Internet, SOHO networks or corporate intranets, VTRs, CD-ROMs and mobile devices, as well as PowerPoint, PDF, HTML and plain old paper.

For the Mac world, new Compression Master software from popwire



iPod docking station

Technology supports video conversion to and from almost any format required for video, TV, portable media and or online delivery, including DV, QuickTime, MPEG, H.264, 3GPP, Flash, WMV and RealMedia.

A selection of template presets and user-selectable menu settings give full control over video encoding choices, from HD to cell phone. Frame rates, pixel aspect ratios, audio sampling, color conversions, batch processing and many more functions are supported in the program, making it a very flexible tool for packaging and delivering video-based communications, and for building your business.

By Lee Rickwood

Lee Rickwood operates Word On A Wire, an independent company providing editorial, media production and consulting services to individuals and companies across North America. He can be reached at videodaze@goodmedia.com.

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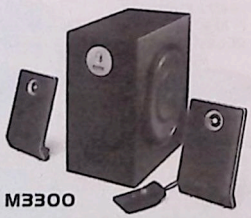

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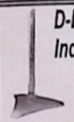

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ASUS N6800XT AGP8X 128MB DDR 256BIT TV-OUT DVI, Video
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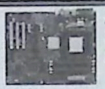

ASUS A8V-E - DELUXE S 939 5PCI / 4DDR / USB PCI-Express / IEEE1394
$138.88

Alpha Shield Hardware Firewall - Block the hackers and worms
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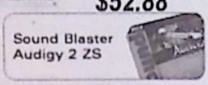

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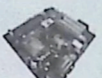

ECS P4M800-M7 (S 775) with S-ATA , 6 channel LAN , USB2.0 , AGP8X
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Speaker + Subwoofer
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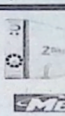
$19.88



ZDisc External Storage CI-330U (For IDE HDD)
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Samsung 740N
17" LCD Black
600:1 / 8ms
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Samsung 920N
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Intel Dual Xeon 2.8G-----$1269

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OCZ Dual Channel Kit DDR 1024MB (PC3200)
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AQ46 ATX Tower Case with Front USB
ATX 520W 24pin + 8 pin Server Power Supply

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ASUS Nvidia N6800XT 128MB AGP8X TV-OUT
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MS Media Keybaord + MS Optical Mouse----$25.95

$45.99

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350W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

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64bit Gamer

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64bit Dual Core 3800+------$889

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DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
Nvidia 6800XT 128M DDR AGP8X TV-OUT
USB2.0 / Integrated Gigabit NIC
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450W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

AMD Premium

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AMD 64bit (939) 3500+--$819
64bit Dual Core 3800+------$939

Asus A8V-E-SE S-ATA PCI-Express
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S-ATA 250GB 7200rpm (8M) HDD
DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
ATI X800 GTO 256M DDR3 PCI-Express
USB2.0 / Integrated Gigabit NIC
Interated 6-Channel Audio
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Intel Value

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Intel Celeron D 2.53G-----$279
Intel P4 (478) 2.4G-----$319

ECS PM800-M2, S-ATA AGP8X
256 MB DDR400 (PC3200) RAM
80GB 7200rpm HDD
52x32x52 CDRW + Software
1.44MB Floppy Drive
Upto 64M Video + AGP8X Slot
Integrated 10/100 NIC
Integrated 6-Channel Audio
350W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

P4 Power

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Intel Dual Core (805) 2.6G--$429
P4 LGA775 (630) 3.0G-----$459

ASUS P5V800-MX, S-ATA, AGP8X
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S-ATA 80GB (8M) 7200rpm HDD
DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
Upto 64M Video + AGP8X Slot
USB2.0 / Integrated 10/100 LAN
Integrated 6-Channel Audio
400W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

P4 PRO

Intel LGA775 (506) 2.6G--$529
Intel Dual Core (805) 2.6G--$575
Intel Dual Core (630) 3.0G--$605

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DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
Nvidia 6200TC/64/256 256MB PCI-Express
USB2.0 / Integrated 10/100 LAN
Integrated 6-Channel Audio
400W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

Intel Gamer

Intel Dual Core (305) 2.6G---$729
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Intel Dual Core (830) 3.0G---$869

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DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
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USB2.0 / Integrated Gigabit NIC
Integrated 6-Channel Audio
450W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

Intel Premium

Intel Dual Core (805) 2.6G---$799
Intel Dual Core (820) 2.8G---$879
Intel Dual Core (830) 3.0G---$939

ASUS P5PL2 PCI-Express S-ATA
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S-ATA 250GB 7200rpm (8M) HDD
DVD-RW 16X +/- Dual Layer
1.44MB Floppy Drive
ATI X800 GTO 256M DDR3 PCI-Express
USB2.0 / Integrated Gigabit NIC
Interated 6-Channel Audio
450W Tower Case w/ 2x USB

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Digital cameras as business tools

If you run a small business or work on your own, you know that one of the joys (curses) is that you get to (have to) do everything yourself. If you already have a decent computer and printer, adding a digital camera to the mix will expand your possibilities.

If your work involves reports, including pictures of a relevant detail enhances the impact of what you say – and digital images can easily be dropped directly into a word processing document. If you sell products, you'll need pictures of them for brochures and catalogues or for online selling sites. Here again, digital will make your job simpler. However, bad pictures can turn viewers off and reflect badly on you and your business. Here are some pointers on how to take photos that have a professional flair.

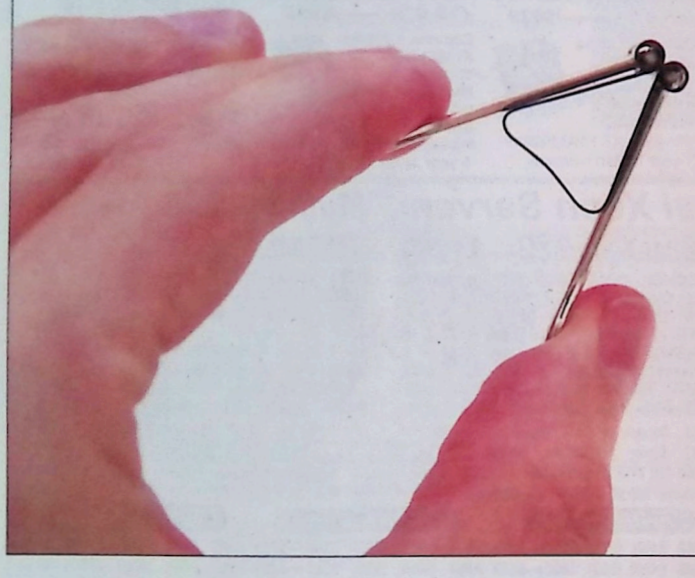
Light it right

Photographic lighting can be defined along a specular-diffuse continuum – the sun and camera flash units are specular light sources, while diffuse lighting occurs on a bright overcast day or from bounced flash lighting. The main difference between them is the shadows they create.

Unless you want to make a serious study of lighting, go diffuse. It is more forgiving than specular lighting and it's flattering to both people and objects. You can buy lighting umbrellas, diffusers and reflectors to make the specular light of an electronic flash more diffuse, or you can bounce the flash off a white ceiling or wall. A relatively new product is the tabletop light tent, which is a unit made of translucent white material. These have become quite popular for people taking photos of objects for sites like eBay. You direct a light source to the outside of the tent and whatever you've placed inside is bathed in a soft, even light.

Context and framing

This has to do with how you locate the main subject within the image frame. Zoom in close enough to reveal important details of your subject. It is best to photograph product items individually or in small groups on a neutral background so nothing else competes for the viewer's attention. With a very small object, you can place something of known size next to it, which gives an important clue about its size. If you are involved in field reports, it is often better to mix close-ups with wider shots that include the surrounding area, because context is often as important as the subject alone. Bring the camera down closer to the level of the object, so you achieve a more natural perspective.



Pick the right resolution

Even a mid-range 4-megapixel digital camera will create images that look good in print or on the Web. However, you will need to make a different version for each medium. For high-quality printing, images should be around 300 pixels per inch but for the Web, 72 pixels per inch is all that's needed. This means an image you want to appear around three inches wide would only have to be 210 pixels across for the Web, but around 900 pixels across for print. Putting the larger version online isn't a good idea, mainly because big images slow down Web page loading – which tends to drive visitors away.

By David Tanaka

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In the home office, space comes at a premium.

As such, the technology the home office uses needs to fill many roles without wasting valuable real estate.

Multifunction printers (MFPs) fit this bill, incorporating many oft-used office functions into one relatively small device. MFPs mash printer, copier, scanner and sometimes fax machine into one, requiring much less desk space and acting as an all-in-one document centre.

It should be noted, however, that an inkjet MFP is only suitable for light duty where photocopying is concerned; ink cartridges are cost prohibitive when used as a primary copier. Don't sell off your Kinko's prepaid card just yet.

Recently, some MFPs have opted to leave out the dedicated faxing element of the equation. In this case, users can get a simple electronic faxing service that delivers received faxes to email with all the benefits that go along with. Faxes can be sent to a landline phone number and are indistinguishable from those sent through conventional means.

In addition to looking after the needs of the home office, MFPs often pull double duty, acting as the family printer on weekends and after work hours. Some of the printers tested here opt to put focus on the after work duties, doing away with the fax machine element and replacing it with a lighted scanning lid for scanning negatives and transparencies as well as dedicated photo printing inks designed to make the MFP into a digital darkroom of sorts.

Personal preference and SOHO needs will dictate the best fit for any given user.

We judged the MFPs tested based on the general home office's needs. Print times are measured from the moment paper is pulled into the printer at the start of a job at the factory default normal quality setting. Spooling times were similar across the various MFPs. Monochrome printing was tested using a standard printed page with no formatting beyond carriage returns, netting an approximately five per cent black coverage page. Colour printing was tested using the first page of the Color Printing Test at nemesis.lonestar.org/site/color_test.html.

The manufacturer supplied print speeds for both colour and monochrome are also listed. Real world print times differ greatly from the manufacturer-listed ppm.

All MFPs tested include drivers and software for Windows and Mac OS X.

Canon Pixma M800

Canon Pixma M800

$575 www.canon.ca

Listed print speed – Black: 30 ppm Listed print speed – Colour: 24 ppm

Document feeder: N

Non-interpolated scanning resolution: 2400 x 4800 dpi

Number of ink cartridges: 6

Accepted media / direct print standard: Memory Stick, CompactFlash, SmartMedia, SD Memory Card, MultiMediaCard, Memory Stick PRO, IBM Microdrive, PictBridge, Canon Bubble Jet Direct

Canon's Pixma M800 is the fastest of the printers tested with delivering the first five per cent black page in eight seconds with 10 coming through in 59 seconds for an impressive real world ppm of 10.

Likewise, one colour page was delivered in 13 seconds with five coming through in 1:36.

Colour print quality on standard office paper was the most vibrant of the printers tested and is unmatched in photo reproduction quality, delivering vivid 4 x 6 prints in under 40 seconds.

That said, the M800 is also unmatched in price, coming in a full $175 higher than the next most expensive printer.

The printer includes media reader slots for numerous brands of camera storage and is PictBridge enabled. An articulated 3.5-inch colour LCD screen simplifies PC-free photo printing and makes the printer more versatile than those with fixed LCDs as users can position the screen for optimum viewing wherever the printer is placed.

Six ink cartridges (cyan, magenta, yellow, black, light cyan and light magenta) can be replaced independent of each other and while it's not exactly a major selling point, the cartridge well lights a red LED, making the cartridge glow when inserted correctly.

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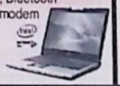

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Canon opts for a lighted lid for negative and transparency scanning rather than a top-mounted document feeder, which makes scanning multi-page documents for optical character recognition (OCR) or digital faxing a laborious process.

Lexmark x8350

$280 www.lexmark.ca
Listed print speed – Black: 25 ppm Listed print speed – Colour: 19 ppm
Document feeder: 50 sheets
Non-interpolated scanning resolution: 1200 x 2400 dpi
Number of ink cartridges: 2
Accepted media: Memory Stick, CompactFlash, SmartMedia, SD Memory Card, MultiMediaCard, xD-Picture Card, Memory Stick PRO, PictBridge

Lexmark's X8350 successfully straddles the line between business and home machines.

The MFP includes front-mounted slots for a wide array of camera storage media and users can swap out the included black ink cartridge in favour of a photo cartridge. The downside in this case however is that the photo cartridge significantly slows down black and white printing and that the print nozzles must be aligned and cleaned whenever users switch between black and photo ink cartridges at a cost of wasted ink.

Our black and white test document emerged from the printer within 16 seconds with 10 pages coming through in 2:38 for a ppm count just under four.

Our colour page made it through the MFP in 48 seconds with five pages clearing in 3:38.

Colour documents were bright and sharp with only slight banding visible in saturated blue and green.

Monochrome text displayed what looked like a slight bleed and wasn't as crisp as we would have liked when printing in the factory default setting. Choosing a higher print quality remedied this somewhat but at significant cost to the ppm.

A 2.4-inch colour LCD screen displays helpful setup tips and prompts,

Lexmark x8350

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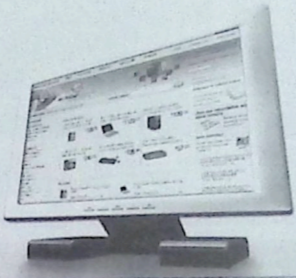

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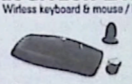

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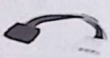

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512MB PC3200 400MHz DDR RAM(samsung)
Seagate 120GB ATA-133 7200PRM/8MB IDE Hard Drive
18" 812UL (Black) Tower Case w/ USB/ 400w Power Supply
Logitech Internet Pro Desktop Keyboard & Mouse
AC97 Software Sound
Wooden K-160A 2.1 Subwoofer Speaker System
Integrated 10/100 Base Networking
LG 16X DVD +/-RW GSA-H10ABK 16X8X / 16X8X (Black) Dual Layer
Three Year Labor, One Year Parts Hardware Depot Warranty

4.Diamond Package $499

Intel Pentium4 630 3.0 GHz 800 MHz LGA775 2MB Cache CPU
ASUS P5S800-VM S775 With/Video/Lan/SATA/DDR4 Motherboard
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WD 80GB ATA133 7200rpm/8.9ms/8MB Hard Drive
18" 815UL Tower Case w/ 400w Power Supply / USB
Ultraslim Multimedia WIN98 P/S2 Keyboard
3D Optical Mouse USB
AC97 Software Sound
Wooden K-160A 2.1 Subwoofer Speaker System
Integrated 10/100 Base Networking
LG 16X DVD +/-RW GSA4167B 16X8X / 16X8X Dual Layer
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ASUS P4S8X-MX With Video /Lan/SoundMotherboard
512MB PC3200 400MHz DDR RAM(samsung)
WD 80GB ATA133 7200RPM/8.9m/2MB Hard Drive
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Ultraslim Multimedia WIN98 P/S2 Keboard
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AC97 Software Sound
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6. Game Package $1,126

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Seagate 200GB SATA150HD 7200RPM 8.5ms Hard Drive
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Integrated 10/100 Base Networking
LG 16X DVD +/-RW GSA-H10ABK 16X8X / 16X8X (Black) Dual Layer
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PARTS

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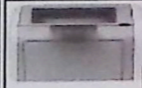

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Brother MFC640CW

along with informative menus screens for copying and faxing, displays address book information and ink levels. Said LCD is hard to see when at eye-level with the device – as is the case if seated at a desk – however. Standing above the MFP when using it as a copier for example, the display is perfectly positioned.

Brother MFC640CW

$300 www.brother.ca
Listed print speed – Black: 20 ppm Listed print speed – Colour: 15 ppm
Document feeder: 10 sheets
Non-interpolated scanning resolution: 600 x 2400 dpi
Number of ink cartridges: 4
Accepted media: Memory Stick, CompactFlash, SmartMedia, SD Memory Card, MultiMediaCard, xD-Picture Card, Memory Stick PRO

Brother's MFC640CW is all business, as the MFPs tested here go. Its attractive price point and 802.11b/g wireless capability for simple printer sharing across a network are the major selling points while its slow printing speed in both colour and black and white are the major strikes against.

The 640CW is a short, squat, space-saving design and more closely resembles a fax machine than a traditional printer. It is unique in our roundup in that it incorporates a landline telephone handset to potentially eliminate one more device from the desktop. Also, the machine includes a simple digital answering machine capable of storing up to 29 minutes.

The relatively low resolution scanning bed allows for picture scanning and a paper feeding mechanism simplifies faxing and copying.

The MFC640CW is among the slower printers tested where print speed is concerned. Our monochrome test page took 29 seconds to print with 10 five per cent black pages taking over five minutes to print; the last one being delivered 5:14 after the first page was pulled in to the printer. This works out to a page per minutes (ppm) count of slightly under two.

For colour printing, the MFC640CW managed one page in just under a minute (55 sec) with five pages taking 7:46.

Text-only print jobs came out clear and sharp using normal quality settings while colour printing was similarly crisp with some banding noticeable in saturated reds and purples.

All menu functions are simple and many are accessible from the two line monochrome LCD display mounted on the front of the printer.

Its relatively slow printing pace is offset somewhat by 802.11g wireless functionality, its small footprint and by the fact that it seamlessly incorporates numerous functions into one neat package.

Epson Photo RX620

$400 www.epson.ca
Listed print speed – Black: 17 ppm Listed print speed – Colour: 16 ppm
Document feeder: N
Non-interpolated scanning resolution: 2400 x 4800 dpi
Number of ink cartridges: 6
Accepted media / direct print standard: Memory Stick, CompactFlash, SmartMedia, SD Memory Card, MultiMediaCard, xD-Picture Card, Memory Stick PRO, PictBridge

Epson's Photo RX620 is an MFP but as the name suggests, it's also designed for more general household use, specifically photo printing. Accordingly, it uses six in cartridges (cyan and light cyan, magenta and light magenta, yellow and black) that can be replaced individually.

Epson Photo RX620

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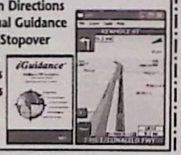

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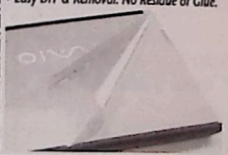

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intel Pentium D inside

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Acer Travelmate TM4361WLMI	P-M 1.6GHz	80GB	512MB	Intel GMA 900	DVD±RW	15.4" 1280x800	16726-1018	$929
Acer Aspire 5672WLMI	Core Duo 1.66GHz	100GB	1GB	ATI X1400	DVD±RW	15.4" 1280x800	17567-1018	$1439
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Acer Travelmate TM5204WLMI	Core Duo 2.0GHz	120GB	2GB	ATI X1600	DVD±RW	15.4" 1024x768	17745-1018	$2359
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LG Xnote LW40	P-M 740 1.7GHz	80GB	512MB	Intel GMA 900	DVD±RW	14.1" 1024x768	17598-1018	$1249

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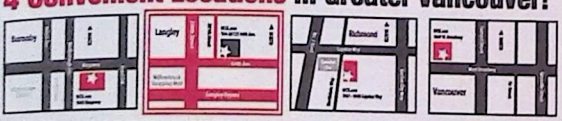

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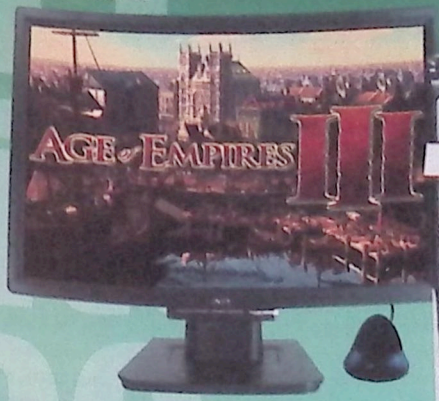

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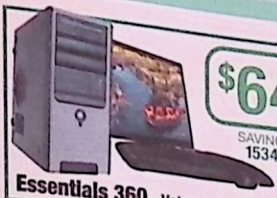

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HP OfficeJet 6210 All-in-One

Also, rather than include a document feeder on top of the machine, the RX620 offers a lighted lid for scanning negatives and transparencies. Likewise, it's not designed as a fax replacement though users can scan and send documents as faxes using a separate email service (not included).

Our five per cent black page printed in 23 seconds with 10 pages making it through in 4:20 for a real world ppm of over two. Our colour document made its way through in 34 seconds with five pages coming in at 2:57.

The printer also handles a wealth of camera storage media including CompactFlash, xD and SD and is PictBridge-enabled.

Photos were printed crisp and clean with no noticeable artifacts.

The RX620 can realistically function as a stand-alone document and picture printing station; users can print directly from memory cards, cameras and negative or positive scans. They can also print an index sheet, fill in the appropriate check boxes to specify quantities and sizes, scan the resulting page and receive prints.

The well positioned 2.4-inch LCD screen displays the contents of supported camera storage media as well as ink levels, menu screens and helpful usability and setup tips.

HP OfficeJet 6210 All-in-One

$300 www.hp.ca

Listed print speed – Black: 23 ppm

Listed print speed – Colour: 18 ppm

Non-interpolated scanning resolution: 1200 x 2400 dpi

Document feeder: 20 sheets

Number of ink cartridges: 2

Accepted media / direct print standard: PictBridge

The 6210 showed the slowest real world ppm count of all the printers tested. The supporting software that ships with the device is also bloated, requiring 339MB for a minimal install and 771MB for a full install, which while it does allow users to get the most from the printer, seems a little excessive.

Integration with the PC is excellent however; users can do one-button scans to a variety of desktop applications including Photoshop, Word (as an optical character recognized and hence editable document), email, scan to desktop as a file and a host of others. The package also includes photo manipulation, sharing and management software.

Our five per cent black test document made its way through the printer in 39 seconds at normal quality with 10 pages coming through in 5:38 for a real world ppm of just under two. Colour printing fared reasonably well with one page making its way through in 44 seconds and five pages taking 3:15.

Print quality was razor sharp in both colour and black and white applications with laser quality text and colours with no noticeable banding or other printing artifacts.

In fact, HP's offering provided the clearest printouts in both colour and monochrome (along with Canon's M800) which, combined with its dog-like printing speed, warranted a re-test to make sure we hadn't mistakenly set the printer to "best" mode. In so called "Fast Normal" printing mode (as opposed to "Normal" as previously tested) the printouts were still of a high quality and came with a more respectable ppm of over three (10 pages in 3:35)

The printer doesn't allow individual ink cartridges to be replaced as they run out. Instead, the six colours come in two ink cartridge assemblies; one for cyan, magenta and yellow plus one for light cyan, light magenta and black.

HP opted not to include media slots on its 6210 MFP though it does interface with any PictBrige-enabled camera via a USB port mounted on the front of the machine.

A top-mounted feeder is handy for faxing large documents and for hands-free copying and scanning.

By Andrew Moore-Crispin

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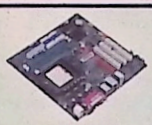

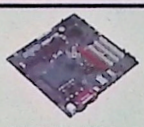

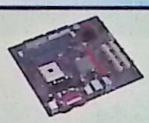

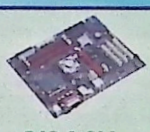

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Chipset	ATI® RS482+SB400	ATI® RC410L & SB450	NVIDIA Geforce 6100 & nForce 410	NVIDIA C19XE & MCP51
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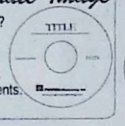

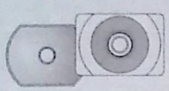

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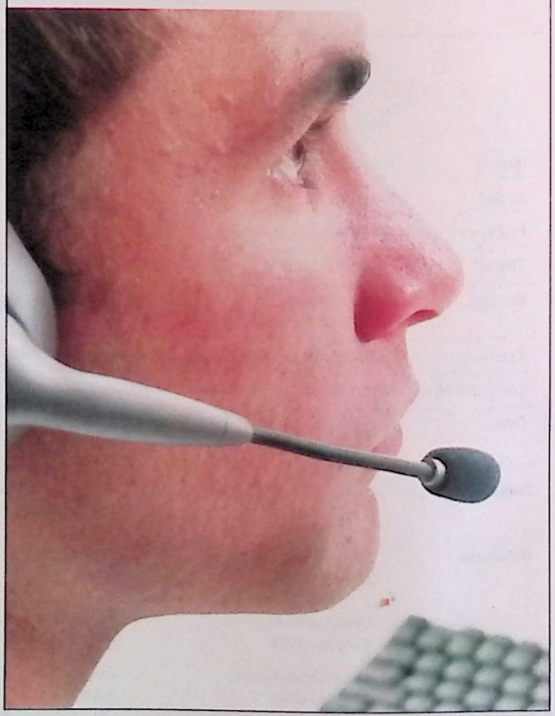
Hit the road : VoIP

Voice Over Internet Protocol, better known as VoIP, has overcome a shaky start to become one of the most popular ways for Internet users to keep in touch with each other; whether with friends, family or colleagues. If you're not familiar with VoIP, think of it as an Internet version of the telephone: instead of picking up your telephone and dialing someone over the phone company's wires, your voice is converted into digital packets and sent out over the Internet. Often, your VoIP service is able to connect seamlessly with telephones on traditional telephone networks (for a fee, of course), or directly to other VoIP subscribers.

When VoIP was first introduced, the technology was not always all that reliable, because the backbone of the Internet didn't have the bandwidth to handle all of the new multimedia applications that were being developed for it. Fast forward a few years to the present, and there's more than enough space on the Internet for podcasts, movie trailers and VoIP conversations.

That's not to say that the technology is perfect: there's still a noticeable lag when you're talking to people – even if they're in the same city – which can cause conversations to take on a fragmented quality as both participants perform a stop/start dance during conversations while trying to figure out when the other person is finished talking.

That said, there are still some advantages to using a VoIP connection over a standard land line. One of the key benefits is the ability to ability to take your phone number with you wherever you go, so long as you have the ability to plug your VoIP hardware into a broadband Internet port. In other words, if you're in a hotel across the country, you can plug your VoIP handset into the broadband connection in your room, and you'll



receive calls just as if you were back home in the office – without the added expense of cell phone roaming charges.

Getting set up

To get started with VoIP, you'll need to have two components in place: a VoIP service provider, and hardware you can use to make the calls. In some cases, the two are tied together.

The service

As with phone service (both cellular and landline), there are a number of larger companies in the business of providing VoIP service for a monthly fee. Some of these are companies that have traditionally provided Internet or telephone service, like Bell, Rogers, and Inter.net. There are also newer companies like Vonage, which have sprung up specifically to provide VoIP service.

In a lot of ways, these new VoIP plans are very similar to your old telephone plans. You'll pay a monthly fee for your phone number, and then for the usage you incur; typically, you can pay a flat fee for all usage within a certain calling area (for example, Canada and the United States), or you can get a plan with a certain number of minutes, and a per-minute charge for any calls thereafter. In most cases, you'll be required to use hardware provided by your VoIP provider in order to access their service.

The beauty of the Internet, however, is the ability to break free of utilities – if you're already paying your Internet provider a monthly fee, why should you have to pay someone else on top of that for a service that's theoretically available for free?

If you don't want to pay big bucks for the privilege of voice chatting with your friends, there's always Skype, a software application that can run on Windows, Mac and Linux. Set up with a similar interface to popular chat program like AIM and MSN, Skype allows you to call your friends and colleagues for free, as long as they're using Skype as well. The nice part is that Skype also allows users to sign up for SkypeIn and SkypeOut services, allowing connections to the standard telephone network for an additional yearly fee and a per-minute fee. Users can even buy multiple phone numbers in various areas around the world to make it seem like they have local numbers in many different markets, even though the numbers all go back to the same Skype user. The downside, unfortunately, is that you'll need to use a computer in some fashion in order to use Skype and while SkypeIn includes a free voicemail subscription, there are no options for Canadian numbers at present.

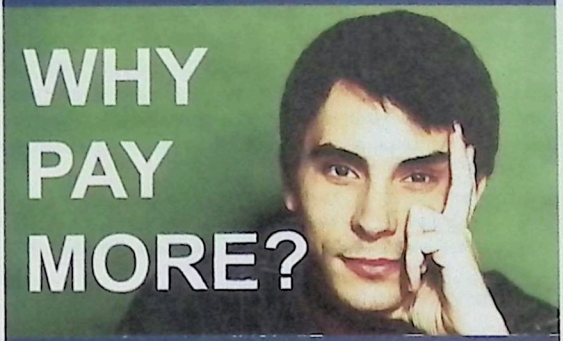
The hardware

In many cases, the VoIP provider you choose will dictate the hardware you'll need for your VoIP service.

For example, Vonage Canada requires users to use hardware directly from Vonage in order to use the service. The company offers the Vtech IP 8100-2 bundle, which features a wireless transceiver that plugs into your broadband connection, and two wireless extension handsets that you can place elsewhere in your house. The bundle is $150 after rebates.

If you're particularly fond of your current telephone (either because it's a fancy schmancy expensive wireless model that you just bought, or because you just like the way your old set feels against your ear), you can often get an adapter, instead: just plug the adapter into your broadband router, and plug your trusty old phone into the adapter. Adapters are available for sale or rent; for example, inter.net offers

VoIP DIGITAL VOICE TELEPHONE SERVICE



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adapter for $5 or $8 per month (plus activation fee), or an outright purchase (with no activation fee) for $100 or $130, depending on the hardware model you choose.

If you're planning to use Skype, there are a few options. I'm personally fond of the Logitech Premium USB Headset 350, which costs about $60. It looks like a regular set of headphones, but it connects to your Mac or Windows machine via USB (without need for any special driver installation), and comes with a boom microphone that folds up against the headset when not in use.

If you're not quite ready to get rid of your regular telephone line just yet, the RTX Dualphone plugs into both your computer (via USB) and your regular telephone line (via the standard phone jack). It comes with a base station and a wireless handset. The trick is, the wireless handset has two connect buttons: after you dial the phone number, you choose either the PC connect button (to dial via Skype) or the regular connect button (to dial via landline). The system also accommodates up to three more handsets. The Dualphone (with single handset) is available for about $130 US.

If you're looking for something cheap and easy, there's the FlashPhone F2K from MPLAT. This little device functions not only as a USB memory key, it comes with a headset for making Skype calls. The FlashPhone comes with the Skype application already onboard, so you can turn any computer you use into your VoIP connection. It's about $50.

By Sean Carruthers

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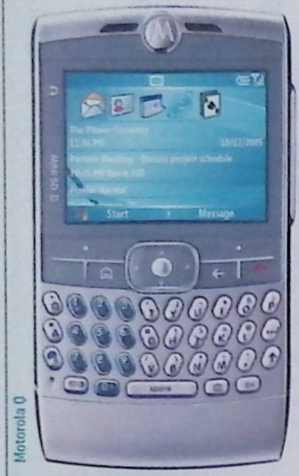
Phone tag

Trying to play catch-up with the latest in cell phone technology can be a daunting task, especially for mobile executives who seek more efficient ways to communicate with colleagues and clients while on the road.

"Push email" solutions, such as BlackBerrys and other smartphones, are also sought-after devices, especially those with PDA-like functionality so you can work on documents and presentations anywhere and anytime.

The following is a look at a few recommended handsets designed for the tireless traveler.

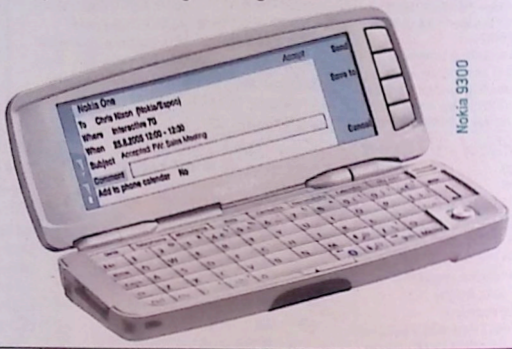


Thin is in

Think of it as a BlackBerry on a diet: the Motorola Q is the thinnest QWERTY-based push email device in the world (11.5mm), plus it's a cell phone, Web surfer, multimedia player, digital camera and productivity tool. Due out about the time you read this (carrier and price to be determined), the "Q" runs on the new Windows Mobile 5.0 platform for reliable and powerful performance and smooth synchronization with your Windows-based PC. Similar to the BlackBerry, this Bluetooth-enabled device houses an intuitive thumbwheel for one-handed control, and also includes stereo-quality speakers (and speakerphone feature) and a Mini-SD removable memory card slot for music, photos, videos or games.

Laptop replacement

Due out sometime this spring, the Nokia 9300 is a clamshell GSM/GPRS smartphone with a full keyboard, large colour screen and 80MB of onboard



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memory to store documents, presentations, applications and multimedia files (and is expandable up to 2GB). This device also ships preloaded with software designed for professionals, including Nokia's mobile email program that allows users to compose, read and delete e-mails, manage local folders and work offline. When opened, users can navigate through all the menu screens via the five-way joystick to access features such hands-free conversations (via speakerphone or Bluetooth headset), high-speed Internet browsing (including support for HTML/XHTML), playing MP3s or using the built-in office applications including a PDF viewer.

SOHO saviour

Consider it Windows for your pocket. The Audiovox PPC-6600 runs on the latest Windows Mobile 5.0 operating system which makes it a breeze to access familiar programs such as Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and Internet Explorer – and easily sync it to your Windows XP-based computer. Plus, this all-in-one Bluetooth-enabled cell phone (with speaker-phone) includes a still and video camera, thumb keyboard and touch-screen interface options and multiple PDA-like tools to help keep you productive – even at 30,000 feet. Under the hood of this device runs a 400MHz Intel processor, 64MB of RAM and is GPS-ready for optional navigation and emergency tracking packages. Available through Bell Mobility, the Audiovox PPC-6600 costs $349 for three-year term; $624 for two-year term; $699 for one-year term; or $749 for 30 days.

Audiovox PPC-6600 with thumb keyboard

Razr sharp

Take one of the hottest phones in recent memory and add high-speed surfing and downloading and you'll end up with the new Motorola Razr V3c with EVDO ($149.99 with a 36-month Telus Mobility contract). The super slim Razr is just 1.4 cm thin, less than 10 cm long and only 5.3 cm wide, but the handset is durable thanks to its metallic finish and keypad created from a single sheet of nickel-plated copper alloy. Along with network speeds topping at 2.4 Mbps (yes, that's broadband speeds), the phone features a 1.3 Megapixel camera and support for video capture, integrated MP3 player, advanced speech recognition and Bluetooth for

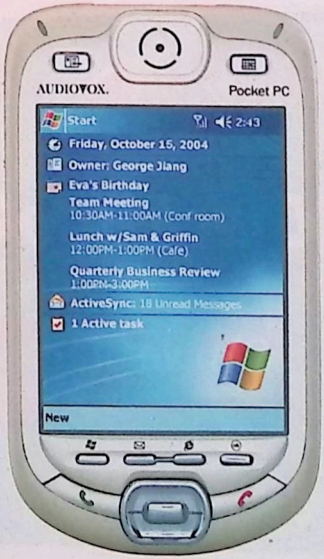
Motorola Razr V3c

wireless devices. You can also use it as a wireless modem by connecting it to your laptop with an optional modem kit.

Over and out

Available exclusively through Telus Mobility's Mike network, the Motorola i870 is the company's latest "push-to-talk" handset (think walkie-talkies), but with many extras such as Bluetooth support, a 1.3-megapixel camera, MP3 player, removable memory cards and multimedia messaging. Plus, along with its Direct Connect push-to-talk service that lets you speak instantly with millions of other users in Canada, the U.S., Mexico and South America, the Motorola i870 also offers "push-to-view" picture messaging and the ability to push contact information – such as names, phone numbers and email addresses – for yourself as a virtual business card or anyone in your stored contacts list. Telus Mobility customers can pick up this handset for $349 with 36-month contract or $499.99 without.

By Marc Saltzman



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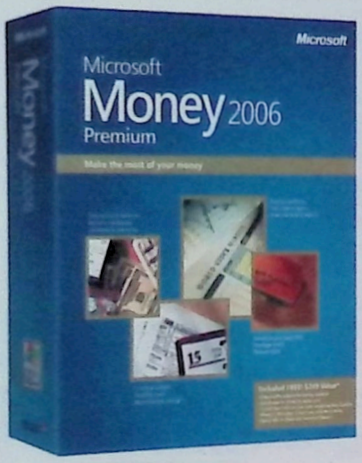
Accounting for the Teleworker

Working alone at home implies many responsibilities and a certain amount of self discipline. It's all very well if you simply work for a company and do not have to worry about invoices, work-associated expenses and sending to Treasury Board the GST you collect on a quarterly basis. But if you operate your own business (and more and more people do), you either need a good accountant or a good software program that will take care of your finances and even prepare your tax return at the end of each year. Or both.



In recent years, we have seen the appearance of a host of programs written to help people run their financial affairs as well as prepare and submit their tax returns with variable degrees of accuracy. Lately, however, things have improved to the point that the accuracy of accounting programs is now almost as good as that of experienced accountants, assuming the end user understands how to use the software.

Intuit Canada has become the leading Canadian provider of business, financial and tax management solutions for small and mid-sized businesses with a wide array of products aimed at helping individuals, small businesses, retailers and financial professionals to better manage their financial lives and businesses.

Some of these solutions apply more particularly to the teleworker and one that stands out for the budging teleworker is QuickBooks Simple Start Edition, a program targeting new and home-based business specifically.

The program installs itself easily and offers a truly simple way to track money going in and out of your business.

Once the product is activated over the 'net, it can be put to use. It all begins with seven handy lessons showing you how to get around the program, set up a checking account, bill a customer, receive payments for an invoice, record a deposit, write a check and even find out how your business is doing.

The second feature of the program is "Managing your business." It includes a new business check list, a Year-end Guide and a section entitled "Preparing for Tax time" which gives you various choices such as using an accountant (the program will then prepare the needed reports), using another Intuit software called QuickTax for business or using QuickBooks to prepare your own tax forms.

Finally, QuickBooks Simple Start provides a section for "Growing your Business" which includes business services, access to upgrades for QuickBooks and resources for finding a qualified accountant.

Intuit apparently believes that in the case of complex financial operations, the help of an accountant may in fact become imperative. To this end, it offers a network of "ProAdvisors," accountants,

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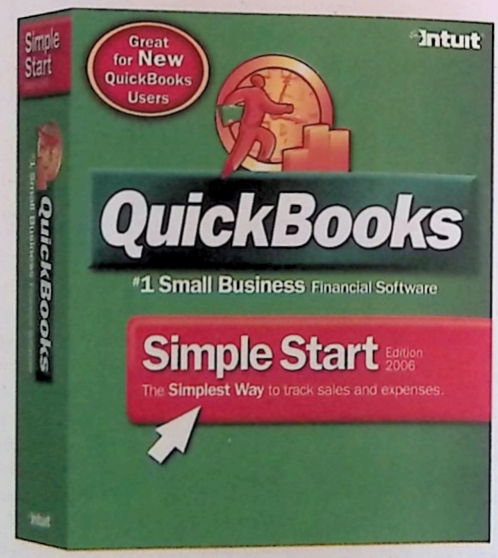

bookkeepers and financial consultants familiar with Canada's financial landscape.

Their role is to help you get up to speed on QuickBooks and show you tips and tricks to run your business more efficiently.

Access to ProAdvisors is through Internet and their advice and guidance covers various fields ranging from income tax preparation to financial planning and book-keeping services.

One of the newest functionalities of Easy Start is its capacity to interact with Internet banking services, a function very useful to teleworkers.

While the product can facilitate the work of a teleworker by recording and printing all the cheques made out to cover the purchase of various products or payment of bills, it can also record all payments made through Internet banking.

Intuit is not the only provider of accounting software on the Canadian market. Microsoft also offers an accounting solution for teleworkers in Money 2006.

Microsoft Money, while not as elaborate as its main competitor, has the advantage of working with its user's bank's Web site which enables you to see at once a complete view of your finances automatically. Another interesting characteristic of Money 2006 is its ability to create for you a complete budget that even includes expenses such as dining out.

Furthermore, the program manages all bills in one place and can even pay them online

You can buy EasyStart for $79.99 and Microsoft Money 2006 for $39.99.

By André Salwyn

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Moving to Mac: Virus Spotting

That sound you heard in mid-February was the sound of millions of Mac users' jaws hitting the floor. After years of gloating about Mac's security superiority over Windows, Apple users got news of the first "virus" to hit the Mac OS operating system in a while.

The virus, known as OSX.Leap.A (aka OSX/Leap-A, OSX/Leap and other slight variations), is actually a worm which infects various files on a Mac OS X system, and spreads itself via the iChat instant messaging program. It disguises itself as an iChat file transfer of a file called latestpics.tgz, which promises to be an archive of preview photos of the next version of the Mac OS X operating system, OS X 10.5.

Since OSX.Leap.A was released into the wild, it has infected very few machines (estimated at less than 50 at press time). That's partly because the worm needs user intervention in order to infect a machine: you have to knowingly open up the archive, and then actually try to open up the resulting file. The other thing keeping the infection rate low is that users who aren't logged in as administrators can't fully infect their systems, so it won't propagate; perhaps those logged in as administrators are wise enough to not simply open anything that people send them, as well.

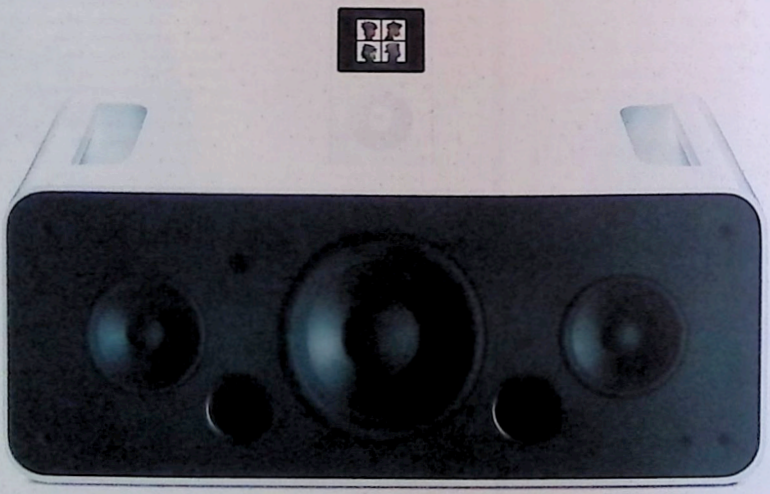
It's worth noting that one of the key ways that any security threat spreads – whether it's on Windows, Mac or Linux – is through social engineering, not software engineering: you don't have to write particularly clever code to bypass security lockouts when someone invites you in through the front door and gives you a security pass, too. Often times, users are all to happy to override basic security prevention when there's the promise of some reward – a free game, naked pics of some famous person, a top secret love letter – even when common sense says it's probably a trick. It speaks volumes though that the writer of OSX.Leap.A thought that the lure for Mac users should be a sneak peak at OS X 10.5 rather than pornography.

There are many Windows users out there who run their computers in a manner that ensures that they'll get infected the next time they go out onto the Internet, but there are also a ton of users who can use the 'net on an ongoing basis without worrying that their system will be compromised, because they use good security practices while online.

The same basic security practices must be followed by Mac users as well. True, Mac OS X is considered more secure than Windows, both because the user is generally prompted for a password before any major system changes are made, and the fact that install base is smaller and therefore security threats would find it that much harder to spread. But even Mac users can be tricked into doing things that override basic security.

On the grand scale, OSX.Leap.A is a failure as a virus, but it's a massive success in at least one department: it serves as a wake-up call to those in the Mac community who believe they are immune to viruses and other security threats simply because they are using a Mac. OSX.Leap.A proves all too well that that's not necessarily the case.

By Sean Carruthers



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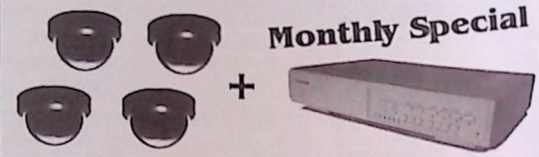

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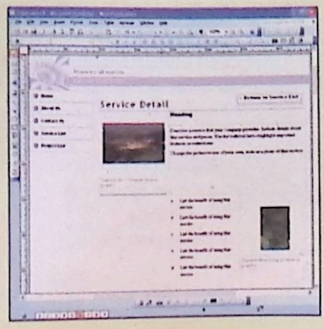


Service.bmp
This services-based Publisher Web site contains all the basics you need – all you do is replace the prompts with your information.

Every business should have an online presence in just the same way it has a postal address and a phone number. The reason is that many people source information from the Web in the same way they might have used the phone directory in the past. If your business doesn't have a Web site, it will be harder to find than it should be. However, that said, your business doesn't have to spend thousands to have an appropriate Web presence.

With your stated goal in mind, plan your site. Anything you add to the site should help you achieve your goal – if not, it simply shouldn't be there. Design your site with a hierarchical design with the home page at the top and five or six pages at the next level. These include an About Us page, a Contact page and three or four pages dividing the site up into logical sections. If you have more information than fits in these five or six pages it should appear at a lower level on the site.

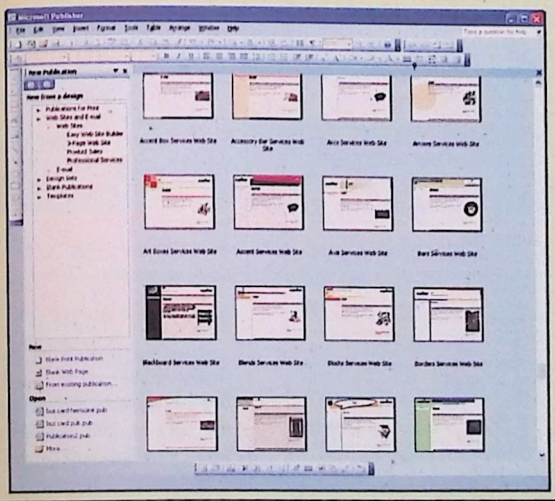
A simple Web site can be created in Microsoft FrontPage, Word or Publisher. In fact, while purist Web designers scoff at using Publisher for a site, it really does a very good job of a small web site – it's easy to use (there are plenty of site designs to choose from), the layout can contain elements you use in your other publications so it can be easily banded to match your "look," and, if your hosting service provides the FrontPage Server Extensions (look for one that does), you can add custom feedback forms very easily. The added plus is that Publisher, unlike FrontPage, is now an integral part of the Microsoft Office suite. Of course there are other tools you can also use including the very popular Dreamweaver.

Domain.bmp
Domain name services like caDNS.ca and internic.ca let you register Canada-specific domain names.

What constitutes an appropriate Web presence depends on what you do and your clientele. A business that services a local population such as a restaurant or service business can get by with a Web page or two with some basic information about the business and how to make contact. A business that appeals to a wider audience – even an international one – will need a more detailed site, and a business that will be selling online needs an e-commerce solution that support this activity.

Before you crank up FrontPage or Publisher or start investigating shopping carts for your business, grab a pen and paper and find a quiet corner to sit and plan. Begin by determining the goal that your Web site should achieve and then determine what you need to do to meet this goal. If your goal is to sell products online you'll need to display your line, offer information that will help a buyer determine if it is what they need and supply a mechanism for ordering and receiving payment. If your goal is to inform your clientele, you must provide the information they'll want to know.

Designs.bmp
Publisher has Web site designs that will coordinate with all your other Publisher-created materials.



When creating your site, design it from your visitors' point of view – ask yourself what they will come looking for and what they will want to see? Make sure your site is all about meeting their needs – not a bandstand from which you "strut your stuff." Sites with a strong visitor-centric focus are easy to navigate and provide everything a visitor needs in an easily-accessible format.

Another principle to keep in mind is "less is more." Your site does not need a Flash movie introduction, it doesn't need to glitter or be technologically very smart – it shouldn't need special plug-ins to navigate and it shouldn't play sounds! What it should do is work and be easy for a visitor to navigate and find what they're looking for, fast! There's simply too much competition on the web for your site to try to be smart at the expense of being informative – Web users will bypass anything that looks too hard to use.

Register a domain name

Buy a domain name for your site so it has an address like www.xyzcorp.ca or www.xyzcorp.com. Once you buy your domain name, provided you keep it registered, it's pretty much yours and you take it with you regardless of where your site is hosted – this lets you move hosting services without losing your site's address. Having your domain name associated with your business name makes it easy for customers to find your site. Even if you're not planning a web site right now, it's possible and sensible to buy your domain name now and park it until you're ready to use it.

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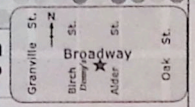

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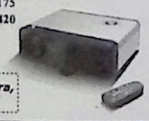

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Letters

Dear HUB...

I have on occasion been able to pick up a copy of HUB at the local library. It appears to be informative for our engineers. Where is the closest outlet here in Richmond Hill were I can obtain copies? The library does not always have copies.

Harry Schmidt
Richmond Hill, Ont.

Check out the distribution search function on our Web site (http://hubcanada.com/content/distribution/index.html). Simply type your postal code into the search box and you'll get a list of nearby locations that carry HUB.

LCD Monitors

I was impressed with the info given on the monitor review and found it quite informative. It gave me lots to think about when it is time for me to choose an LCD monitor. The writer (Andrew Carruthers) was free in speaking his mind on issues with the monitors construction or layout, so I would like to do the same with regards to the layout of the article.

I generally don't raise a fuss over such wonderful information available to me free of charge, but I found this month's Test Lab to be poorly laid out to the point I could not enjoy it. I hope this email helps you to continue to provide your readers with the best you can achieve, rivalling paid magizines.

Rudi Jock
Scarborough, Ont.

Send your feedback to andrew@ppublishing.ca. Please include your full name, city and province. We reserve the right to edit published letters for length and clarity.

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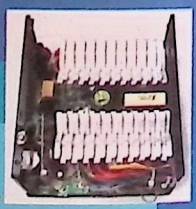

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A piece of the action

Videogame fan sites give hobbyists an "in" to the industry

There are hundreds of videogame "fan sites" on the Web, run by ambitious and dedicated enthusiasts who devote free time (sometimes as much as 40 hours per week) to uploading new screenshots and wallpapers, moderating forums, scouring the Internet for fresh content and tweaking layouts. Their only reward, in many cases, is the knowledge that they're sharing their passion for a particular videogame or franchise with other fans around the world.

Fan sites straddle a middle ground between traditional news outlets and videogame corporations, and game companies are quick to acknowledge the important contribution of fan sites and the uniquely "biased" perspective they offer the gaming community.

"There is something way more convincing about a fan site's reporting of news than a site that is obviously created by corporate interests," says Jay Watamaniuk, community manager at Edmonton-based game studio BioWare. "The fan site may be biased because [it's run by] fans, but I'm willing to bet that information is less censored and crafted. That sort of angle is something we simply cannot produce since we are the company involved ... we are still 'The Man' to some fans."

Prince of Persia Legacy (www.poplegacy.planets.gamespy.com) is a typical example of a thriving fan site. Maintained for the past six years by Zain Alvi, a 20-year-old student from New Jersey, the site is a source of information for Prince of Persia games going back to the early 1990s, providing box images, screenshots, story scripts and interviews.

Alvi is able to host his site for free through Gamespy, which provides Web templates, bandwidth, and various editing tools to Webmasters in exchange for showing ads on their sites.

Natasha Postolovski is able to run her Elder Scrolls fan site, Beyond Oblivion (www.elderscrolls.blogspot.com), at no cost as well because she takes advantage of free images and site hosting services at Blogger.com, TinyPic.com and Photobucket.com.

"Most of the information I put on the site comes from close reading of interviews, previews, and developer quotes," says Postolovski. "The official forums are also a great place to find information."

Ryan Kubasa says being Japanese has been a big advantage in helping him maintain his Dragon Quest 8 fan site www.DragonQuest8.org, because his aunt is able to send him the official Japanese strategy guides, which he then scans and uses on the site months before the same information is available in North America.

Although fan sites are run on a volunteer basis, and generate little or no actual revenue, there are still perks. Many game companies recognize the role fan sites play in nurturing the sense of community around a particular game, and afford fan site Webmasters special privileges, like sending them press releases and exclusive content, or even sponsoring them to attend events like the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3).

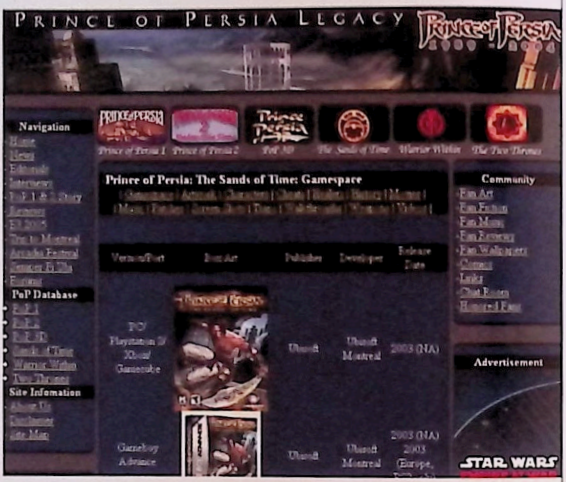
Certain publishers have begun making it even easier for fan sites to get off the ground by releasing official "fan site kits" that contain a selection of exclusive images, desktop wallpapers, game screenshots, banners, interviews and Web graphics.

Aaron Kaufman, community manager at Electronic Arts: Los Angeles, says his company holds regular "community summits" where fan site Webmasters are invited to the studio for exclusive previews of games and the opportunity to interact face-to-face with developers.

"For example," Kaufman explains, "when we put on our community summit for The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II, we invited 25 of the top community leaders from around the world for a three-day exclusive experience at EALA." Invitees were given a behind the scenes look at the creation process and a chance to play demos and interact with game developers. "We even gave them a chance to create their best 'death animation' sound effect, with the best voice being put in the game – that was hilarious!" Kaufman adds.

Last year, as Webmaster of Prince of Persia: Legacy, Alvi was invited to Montreal for a tour of Ubisoft's studio and an interview with the producer of Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones, Ben Mattes The interview was, of course, uploaded to the site.

By Erin Bell



Here's a look at some of our favourite videogame fan sites from around the Web.

Beyond Oblivion
www.elderscrolls.blogspot.com

The Castlevania Dungeon
http://castlevania.classicgaming.gamespy.com/dungeon.html

DragonQuest8.org
www.dragonquest8.org

GUN Headquarters
www.gunhq.net

Kameo 360
www.kameo360.com

Neverwinter Nights Vault
http://nwvault.ign.com

Prince of Persia Legacy
http://poplegacy.planets.gamespy.com

Resident Evil Fan
http://residentevilfan.com/default.asp

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